



STATE OF THE TOWN  
Brookfield, CT

Bill Tinsley, First Selectman  
February 6, 2014

I can't imagine launching into a talk about Brookfield and our future without a hefty amount of gratitude expressed to the many volunteers who make Brookfield a great place to live. Many of those I am referring to are in the audience tonight. Whether you are here in person, or watching a replay of this message at home, on behalf of a grateful town, I express heartfelt thanks to all of you. Working well together, as a team, we can and will achieve many things in the months and years ahead.

Two very short months ago, I stood outside this room, at this podium, to take the oath of office as your First Selectman. In addition to my sworn oath, I pledged to lead by being a good team player myself, together, with you and all of our volunteers. I also promised to be a good listener, to be responsive, to strive for simplicity, and to be Golden Rule guided. I start each day with these pledges in mind. At the end of each day, I try to evaluate how I've done. Many evenings, I get some help in that evaluation from my wife- my best friend. And of course, since many of you are not very shy, I get plenty of feedback. I truly appreciate and welcome it, even if it is occasionally tough to listen to.

The ***State of Our Town*** is good! But we must do better! We have the potential to be an even greater place to live, raise and educate our young, work and have a business, and to feel secure about the future and retirement when the time comes to do so. ***While we have dreamed for many years about the potential of having a vibrant town center, we now have a very realistic chance of making it happen. We can thank the many leaders who came before us – their vision and work has put us in the position to make the possible probable.***

Are there a few obstacles in the way? You bet there are. Frankly, I look forward to the challenges ahead with optimistic anticipation. Top-of-mind for me is one obstacle that we share with most small towns in Connecticut: the cost of funding municipal services and educating our young goes up and up. Yet absent growth in our local economies, there is no corresponding rise in the revenues needed to support the increased costs without significant year-after-year increases to local property tax rates.

Brookfield gets very little funding help from the state and federal governments. Over the past several years, those revenue sources have actually declined. So what is left for us to fall back on? Property Taxes. Constantly raising property taxes is not a very satisfying solution to our need for more revenue. Many of our residents strongly resist further increases in property taxes, and therefore, oppose increases in spending regardless of the rationale for doing so. Conversely, the harsh cutting of services also has its limits and is strongly opposed by many other residents who would rather pay higher taxes.

Those of us who are stewards of your tax dollars must always be conscious of the cost control measures available to us – and we will be. We must always look for ways to be more efficient – to do more with less. For example, a team led by Joan Locke, our Town Clerk, has been analyzing our methodology and costs for publishing legal notices. As a result of their teamwork and collaboration, we can potentially

save \$45000 per year. At the same time, we can increase our Legal Notice delivery from 2700 households to 6500. Nice work!

In my view, however, the clearest and most practical alternative to raising property taxes, or reducing services, is to grow our local economy. We must ensure that our local businesses and economy are healthy and growing, and that we do everything within our local control to help ourselves.

Fortunately, we already have the capacity for economic growth while also having the ability to protect the unique character of our town. Five very strong and positive attributes, collectively and in combination, make us a pretty special place:

1. We are a desirable, safe, and peaceful community with great schools, abundant social and recreational opportunities, and easy access to important services and major markets.
2. We have, in our backyard, one of the best Healthcare Networks in the nation: The Western Connecticut Healthcare Network of Danbury, New Milford, and Norwalk hospitals and their affiliated physician services, clinics, and labs.
3. We have many already-zoned commercial and industrial properties that are either underdeveloped or undeveloped.
4. We have an abundance of in-place organizations whose volunteers have important skills and knowledge.
5. And our most important asset – we have a committed, involved, talented and energetic citizenry.

These five attributes will go a long way toward helping us “jump start” our economic engine. Our already existing Volunteer Boards and Commissions have pretty full plates and they do a great job for Brookfield. Since a “jump start” generally requires an additional temporary power source, I’ve asked several talented and experienced Brookfield Residents to help me provide it. You probably already know them, but let me briefly introduce and thank them for their interest, enthusiasm, and willingness to serve:

- Nelson Malwitz – a retired Sealed Air Executive, moved to Brookfield in 1975 with Marge. They have two grown sons, both members of the 13 year club. David, age 34 lives in San Diego, and Jonathon, age 37 lives in Bethel. Nelson left “real” employment as he calls it to chase his dream of helping others – he is the founder of the Finisher’s Project and he is internationally known for his assistance to people in impoverished parts of the world. He is the consummate professional when it comes to doing a lot with a little.
- Greg Dembowski – a Brookfield resident since 1986. Greg and wife Pat just celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Son Nathan just graduated from Cornell and is looking to enter Medical School. Daughter Erica is a sophomore at Villanova. Nathan and Erica are both members of the 13 year club. Greg is a retired Union Carbide/Dow Chemical Executive. He is a very active member of St. Marguerite’s Parish where he has taught CCD for 15 years. He was President of the YMCA Makos swim team and led the fundraising effort for the \$1.6 million Olympic pool at the Y. He has just been appointed to serve on Brookfield’s Economic Development Commission.
- Pete Peterson – and wife Odessa moved to Brookfield in 1972. They have 3 adult children: Wendy, Stephanie, and Chris – all three graduated from Brookfield High School. Pete is a retired Naval Aviator, and finished his employment career as Vice President of Planning and Marketing at Danbury Hospital. He is a former Board of Finance member and has volunteered for many Brookfield projects including recently the selection of Fitzgerald & Halliday for the 4 corners

revitalization concept plan. Pete always reminds me to say that he is an "all around nice guy" and I couldn't agree more!

- Linda Wagner – a Brookfield resident since 1997. Her sons Scott and Wilson are students at Brookfield High School. Both sons will be members of the 13 year club. Linda is a director of the Brookfield Education Foundation, and the Brookfield Chamber of Commerce. She is the Manager of the Savings Bank of Danbury, Brookfield Branch. Linda has also just been appointed to our recently formed Charter Revision Commission.
- Hal Kurfels – and Linda moved to Brookfield in 1973. Two of their three adult children graduated from BHS, and one from Canterbury. Hal was on the Planning Commission for 10 years, and is currently Chairman of our Economic Development Commission. He is also the Chairman of the Western CT Economic Development Alliance. He is Vice President at Coldwell Banker Commercial.
- David Fernandez – lives with his wife and 3 children in Danbury. They are close enough to Brookfield that we should annex their house and claim them. David is the Manager at Raymour & Flanigan. Last Year, with the help of the Brookfield Chamber of Commerce, he hosted the 1<sup>st</sup> "Taste of Brookfield". He has volunteered to help us with event planning. He has a special family interest in small businesses...his wife's family owns and operates Sinappi's Restaurants. (Incidentally, Raymour & Flanigan is one of Brookfield's largest taxpayer.)

We have already begun the work on several initiatives:

1. We will market Brookfield to the rest of the world by launching a **"We want you in Brookfield" website**. **Greg Dembowski** has agreed to act as volunteer program manager for developing the web-site content. **Pete Peterson** has agreed to volunteer his services to help with copy writing and editing. Our Economic Development Commission will select our website contractor before the end of this month. All of us, working together, aim to have the site active before the annual town meeting in May – when we hope to be able to preview it to you.
2. We will develop a proposal for an **Investment Incentive Plan**. Linda Wagner has agreed to research the different programs available in other states and cities and to develop a proposal to the Board of Selectmen.
3. A **"Brookfield Business Incubator"** Plan will be developed to attract entrepreneurs and business start-ups to available Brookfield space, and supportive human resources and talent. Nelson Malwitz has agreed to program this leg of our strategy.
4. We will begin planning for **Special Events** in an effort to draw attention to Brookfield in general, and with special emphasis on the 4 corners and our new Town Center District. David Fernandez of Raymour & Flanagan has stepped forward to help in this area. We have been discussing the possibility of having an October Harvest themed outdoor event. October of 2014 is a very ambitious goal since it is already February. The idea was discussed this morning with the Brookfield Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors and I am hopeful that it got some traction there.
5. A **\$pend Your Dollar\$ in Brookfield** campaign will be launched to draw attention to our locally owned and operated businesses. While this campaign will target all local businesses, again I anticipate some special emphasis to the redeveloping area at the 4 corners. The campaign will encourage Brookfield and area residents to \$hop and \$pend in Brookfield. After all, businesses who will look at new investment here are going to be interested in how well we support the businesses that are already here. Well, our \$pend Your Dollar\$ in Brookfield campaign will be

targeted to do that. Permit me a few minutes to introduce a few of our own who happen to be with us tonight.

(INTRODUCE THOSE PRESENT)

So then, we enter the next phase of making our dream a reality. I think of it like an endurance event....a marathon. Not our first, not our last, just the next one. Instinctively, most of us recognize that if we set out to reach a particular finish line or goal, it is very important to know where the starting line is. So where are we – fiscally speaking that is.

While we enjoy relatively good fiscal health in Brookfield, we have several challenges ahead that need some exposure, resolution, and better planning for the future:

- Our town's General Fund Balance, our "rainy day fund" so to speak, has taken an unanticipated hit to the tune of \$1.2 million as a result of unauthorized overspending in the education budget. This situation was discovered in the context of our annual financial audit for the year that ended on June 30, 2013. Over the next several weeks, the Boards of Selectmen, Finance and Education will work together to plan the strategy for the prevention of such a recurrence. We must also plan for the replenishment of the fund balance. Even after the replenishment of those funds, our fund balance will not be where financial advisors and rating agencies suggest it should be. Over the next several years, we should be looking to increase it to approx. 15% of our operating budget. In dollars, this represents an increase of \$4.5million based on this year's budget.
- The town has obligations to employees for post-retirement benefits. We have made significant strides in improving the funding of our pension plan obligations, but have not done a good job with respect to the funding needed for post-retirement health insurance benefits. The net present value of those unfunded obligations now exceeds \$14Million - they are growing by over \$2Million per year. It is also clear that we need to better understand the impact of the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. Obama Care) on these obligations.
- Our annual operating budget for roads and buildings maintenance continues to be woefully short of the need. Those of us close to the detail may not come up with the same number, but I'm willing to bet that we agree the additional need is significant. My number – approx. \$1.5Million per year.
- We have a sizable capital project ahead of us in the very near term. Huckleberry Hill Elementary School is past due for major renovation. My estimate before the application of potential state assistance is \$20Million. A recent study shows that our school age population will continue to decline, so our Board of Education has a serious and daunting task for evaluating classroom capacity.
- In my view, we also have an obligation to help our neighbors in Meadowbrook Manor. The flooding problem there must be solved. While it is possible that Brookfield could receive a partial grant for this purpose, the receipt of that aide is far from certain. The cost of the project is estimated at \$2.3 million.

I could continue to list a number of other items of lesser significance but would rather summarize by saying that we must do a much better job of planning for the long term. We give a lot of attention to the annual expense operating budget, and not enough attention the proverbial "can kicked down the road".

Did I just mention the annual operating budget? Well, yes, that time of year is upon us. I have already received requests from the Board of Education and all Municipal departments. On February 14<sup>th</sup>, I will submit my budget request to the Boards of Selectmen and Finance.

I'm not prepared to give you a sneak peak at the number – I still have several nights ahead to *not sleep* on my recommendation, and we still have work to do as a Board of Selectmen as it is actually that budget request that goes to the Board of Finance.

Since it is actually the Board of Finance that presents the final budget that is voted on at referendum, I think to myself: "Do they want me to recommend a budget that they can support, or do you want me to propose a budget that they will cut." By the way, I'm not trying to be funny here. It is a serious thought. Having been both a Board of Education member and Board of Finance member over the past 20 years, I believe our budget setting process provides the First Selectman and the Board of Selectmen with the opportunity to go either way without publicly disclosing which path was taken. Well, let me say this - I will not duck the leadership responsibility. I believe you expect the First Selectman to lead and I will.

I believe I also just mentioned the annual operating Budget Referendum. I will recommend to the Board of Selectmen, and with their approval, recommend at the annual town meeting, that we vote separately on municipal and education budgets. This will give voters more freedom and voice in the voting booth.

As you may be aware, in January the Board of Selectman, following my recommendation, approved a resolution establishing a Charter Revision Commission. Why are we doing this again? Because, I want to codify your right to vote separately on municipal and education budgets. Voting separately on municipal and education budgets is a privilege shared by our neighbors in Newtown, Bethel, Ridgefield, Redding, Sherman, and New Fairfield. Very few Connecticut towns allow their budget to be voted on as one number.

If my recommendation for a new Charter Revision Commission makes you think "Oh no! Here we go again" - let me make something perfectly clear. I will not propose that Brookfield be run by a Town Manager or that we increase the size of the Board of Selectmen.

The Charter Revision Commission is important but let's not lose sight of the main objective. We need to grow our local economy.

Brookfield must act today in order to preserve our community for tomorrow. We will move forward because we, as a town have the capacity to do what needs to be done. We, the people of Brookfield, knew this was the number one small town in Connecticut long before Money Magazine recognized us for it.

The greatest privilege we share as individuals is to serve a cause bigger than ourselves. That cause is Brookfield! As we go forward from tonight, I ask you to remember that no situation Brookfield faces is too great to be overcome by a committed, involved, talented, energetic and caring citizenry. We have it. Together, we are our most valuable asset!

Thank you for listening and being here tonight. I ask that you join me in a commitment to be Golden Rule driven. May God bless the Town of Brookfield and God bless these United States of America.